

The builders of the 19th century applied specific forms to specific architectural functions. Their choice was based on appropriate symbolic content. Big buildings were weighty symbols of the nature and importance of their functions in the moral and intellectual organization of their society. Churches were increasingly built in the spiritual and Christian Gothic style, while banks and post offices declaimed their rectitude in prosperous variants of the virtuous Classical style. Industrial buildings, whose function was newer to the value system of the society, were considered to have no style, and had to make their point through sheer size. In the 20th century the spiritual and virtuous Classical style of churches and banks are sufficiently self-evident to need no interpretation. In an increasingly urban and technologically-oriented world, society worships new gods, and anonymous industrial structures have become the new cathedrals.

Lily Koltun  
 From the introduction to the  
 exhibition and catalogue,  
City Spaces, Urban Places

D.M.: I don't always agree with people who are more architecturally informed than I am. If you gave me power over the city and <sup>I had to</sup> ~~choose between tearing down~~ someone said that the Eglise Notre-Dame ~~was going to be torn down~~ or grain elevator number one, I would certainly choose ~~to have~~ Eglise Notre-Dame. <sup>It's</sup> ~~torn down.~~ That's just a much less innovative and <sup>less</sup> functionally important building.

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David Miller photographs architectural subjects, not the traditionally accepted monuments of the city, but anonymous monumental structures and spaces. This interview deals with the pho-

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tos of grain elevators, parking lots, and construction sites, less extensively with photographs of buildings in Old Montreal, and not at all with architectural photos of Milton-Park, other parts of Montreal, or other cities. Another time, another place.

*The following quote is from a text written by Lily Koltun for the catalogue of the exhibition City Spaces, Urban Places. It seems particularly appropriate for David Miller's choice of architectural subject matter.*

K.T.: You once told me that no one else was photographing grain elevators, so it seemed like a useful thing to do. <sup>Why do</sup> ~~How come~~ you think it's useful?

D.M.: What a terrible question to start with. It's useful in the sense that anything you collect is useful, and I'm sort of an insatiable collector. I think that my interest is predominantly buildings that other people have tended to ignore. If you look at the pictures that I've taken over the last ten years, the grain elevators are just one instance of vernacular architecture, architecture with no name-plate attached to it. My attraction is partially because it's anonymous and partially because it serves a very useful function, which tends to be overlooked.

I also think that the grain elevators are probably some of very most important architecture in Montreal. They're a form which originated here, and a technology which was exported all over the world. Any grain-producing area has Metcalfe grain elevators. And you can't say that for very much of Montreal's architecture, at least not the stuff that survives; most of it was imported. So I think the grain elevators are important as a stylistic progenitor as well as just buildings that served a useful function at one point and deserve to be remembered rather than simply torn down.

K.T.: When you photograph them, do you try to "make" them important?

D.M.: Yes, although I must say it's pretty hard to avoid doing that. They're big. If you've ever stood at the foot of one of them, you realize that you have no choice. You're really just representing them as monuments.

K.T.: ~~When you photograph the grain elevators,~~ often you have <sup>a</sup>~~one~~ photo of a detail, and then one of the whole elevator, and then the elevator in the context. <sup>you</sup>~~What's the objective of doing that?~~  
*Why do you do that?*

D.M.: Two <sup>reasons.</sup>~~things~~. First of all is obsession. If you photograph the same thing over and over again for a few of years, as I tend to do, it helps if to photograph it in different ways. People get a little less bored. On the other hand, buildings can be seen in different contexts. The context of the grain elevator is very different than the average office building in Montreal or in any other city. It tends to be in a more open space, surrounded by railroad tracks, shacks, loading towers, things like that. And it's a little bit easier to isolate. But without some kind of overall context, it's lacking information. If <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ photograph a building, and that's a given amount of information, then <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ photograph that building in an overall context, that's more information that you fit the first picture into. If <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ photograph a detail, that gives you details of construction which, in addition to being visual punctuation, are also just informational.

K.T.: When you were photographing in Old Montreal prior to the harbour, what would you do in order to isolate the subject?

D.M.: What do <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ do to separate out, let's say, interesting or significant from insignificant? Partially, it's lighting. If <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ simply wait until the sunlight is on the building <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ want and the one <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ don't want is in shade, that's a pretty obvious method. Part of it's viewpoint. I generally tend to take a very face-on view, very rarely an oblique view, so <sup>I'm</sup>~~you're~~ less likely to get things <sup>I</sup>~~you~~ don't want. It's a very straightforward, very



obvious, and time-honoured tradition. <sup>I'm</sup> You're interested in one thing and so <sup>I</sup> you plop <sup>my</sup> your camera right down in front of it and <sup>I</sup> you take a picture. You don't allow <sup>myself</sup> yourself to be confused by looking down streets, taking the oblique glance. And then, lastly, I suppose, there's just the way <sup>I</sup> you print. <sup>I</sup> You ~~can~~ darken certain things or lighten certain things in order to draw attention, and I allow myself those romantic excesses.

K.T.: I know when you photographed grain elevators and, I suppose, other architectural subjects as well, you used a method of two exposures. Can you just talk about that?

D.M.: Giving away trade secrets, sure. A long time ago people realized that in order to capture the extreme contrast range that you get in bright sunlight on film, or I guess it would be collodium wet plates in those days, it helped to take an exposure in the sun for a brief period in order to get shadows and modulation of the facade. But in order to fill in details of both highlight and shadow areas, you then capped your lens and waited for a cloud to cover the sun, and then you popped your lens-cap off and did a longer shutter exposure, which gave you your basic exposure. Now, this worked just fine in the collodium wet plate period, because things didn't move that fast. The other great advantage <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ that the collodium wet plate didn't record clouds. When I do this, sometimes the clouds move in the field and I have to abandon the shot. The other thing is that cars tend to move a little bit faster than horse-drawn carriages, and so you'll see half a car or a ghost car way back, a couple of blocks away, in the image. And although the building will be beautifully delineated, there'll be these kind of quirky ghost images that you have to look for.

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K.T.: You're now working on a new project dealing with parking lots. Do you see parking lots as a vernacular, cultural symbol?

D.M.: I do, but to begin with, I don't think it's a new project. What happens is, I get obsessed with all this ridiculous stuff, you know, grain elevators, warehouses, the parking courts behind warehouses, and one thing leads to another. The next thing you know, instead of photographing the buildings and the space that they define, I end up photographing the spaces, with the buildings on the edges. Instead of having the buildings define the spaces, I'm having the spaces define the buildings. Part of it is that I used to take great pains to avoid cars. Any sign of the twentieth century was ruthlessly excised from my photographs. But as time grew on and I got older and wearier, I decided to capitulate. As the spaces became more important, so did the uses of the space, and since much of Montreal's empty space is used for parking and not parks, and for cars and not people, I decided it was a bit silly not to photograph it and document it. What I've been photographing for the last few years is not so much parking lots, generally, as empty spaces and the buildings around them that define those spaces. The two major orientations are, in fact, parking lots and construction sites, which are the two sub-categories of unused space in Montreal.

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THE INSPIRATION FOR MUCH OF DAVID'S WORK COMES FROM NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOURCES, NOT THE CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHIC COMMUNITY. HE IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPETENT, OPINIONATED PHOTO HISTORIANS THAT I KNOW. STORED IMPECCABLY IN HIS STUDY IS A COLLECTION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHS, WITH EMPHASIS ON THE PICTURESQUE IN ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH VIEWS BETWEEN 1850 AND 1880 AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE INTERPRETATION OF CANADIAN LANDSCAPE. I DON'T WANT TO BE MISLEADING. HE ALSO HAS

NUMEROUS PORTRAITS, NINETEENTH-CENTURY TOPOGRAPHICAL VIEWS FROM MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, AND EVEN TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORK. BUT HIS OBSESSION WITH THE PICTURESQUE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY LEAKS INTO HIS OWN PHOTOGRAPHS, TRANSLATED INTO CONTEMPORARY TERMS. THE PARKS AND COUNTRYSIDE OF ENGLAND, FRANCE, AND ITALY BECOME OUR PERVASIVE URBAN CONCEPT, PARKING LOTS. HOW SWEET THE SMELL OF IRONY! THE PRESCRIBED FORMALISM OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, FOREGROUND GREENERY, WATER AND MOUNTAIN VISTAS,<sup>1</sup> GIVES WAY TO A CONTEMPORARY EQUIVALENT, THE GRID SYSTEM.<sup>2</sup>

K.T.: You once talked about grain elevators as being forms of sculpture. Do you consider the unused space as the same thing?

D.M.: In the sense that they're different types of sculpture. You might have positive sculpture and negative sculpture, and space, empty space or quasi empty space is always viewed as the negative side of that. So sure, it's sculpture. If you look at recent photographs, it tends to be a kind of negative that fits the positive. You can sort of plug a grain elevator into the space.

THE GRID PERFORMS MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS. IT EVOKES A LOGIC OR PSEUDO-SCIENTIFIC SYSTEM OF SPACE REGULATION. IT FLATTENS THE SURFACE. IT DEFINES A SPACE WITHIN THE IMAGE, YET IMPLIES THAT THE PICTURE EXTENDS BEYOND IT-

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1 Samuel Bourne: "... they [the Himalayas] consist chiefly of ravine passes and mountain ranges -- without verdure, without foliage, and without water; and a photograph without these three elements must possess very striking compensation features indeed to render it a pleasing and enjoyable picture." Quoted in Samuel Bourne 1834-1912; Photographic Views of India; introduction by Roger Taylor; Sheffield City Polytechnic, England 1980; p. 6.

2 These extracts are from an article, "Movies Move Too Fast," which I wrote and which appeared in Photo Communiqué, Spring 1985.



SELF, THAT IT IS A FRAGMENT CROPPED FROM A LARGER SCENE. IT UNDERSCORES THE REGULARITY OF EXISTING STRUCTURES AND HIGHLIGHTS ANY DEFECT OR BREAK IN THE SYSTEM.<sup>3</sup>

DAVID'S CURRENT WORK, PHOTOS OF CONSTRUCTION SITES AND PARKING LOTS, IS A LOGICAL VEHICLE FOR STRUCTURAL CONCERNS. THE URBAN ARCHITECTURAL ENVIRONMENT IS THE CENTRAL THEME. THERE ARE BUILDINGS TO BE FINISHED IN THE FUTURE, OTHERS WHICH HAVE BEEN DUG UNDER TO MAKE SPACE FOR CAR PARKS AND FACADES WHICH SERVE AS BACKDROPS; SIGNS OF THE FUTURE, REFERENCES TO THE PAST. ALL THESE SITES HAVE AN INHERENT GRID PATTERN: THE GIRDERS AND PYLONS OF BUILDINGS UNDER CONSTRUCTION, THE PAINTED WHITE LINES OF PARKING SLOTS, THE OBSESSIVE REGULARITY OF OFFICE BUILDING FACADES. THESE GRIDS ARE APPROPRIATED AND USED AS A FORMAL COMPONENT TO BUILD THE IMAGE AND AS A SYMBOL TO REINFORCE THE COMMENTARY ON OUR ENVIRONMENT. "PALAIS DE JUSTICE, NORTH FACADE, AUGUST 1981" PLAYS ON THIS IDEA. THE LOWER THIRD OF THE PHOTO IS OCCUPIED BY REGIMENTED CARS; THE UPPER PORTION ACCOMMODATES PART OF A PUBLIC OFFICE BUILDING. A TIRELESSLY REGULAR GRID OF MIRRORED WINDOWS FLATTENS THE SPACE. BUT AT THE UPPER EDGE, THE MONOTONY IS BROKEN. SOMEONE HAS SCRAPED AWAY THE MIRROR FINISH ON ONE WINDOW. SOMEONE SEES THE PARKING LOT BELOW.

D.M.: For the last two years, I've worked almost exclusively with eleven by fourteen. The spaces are bigger, so I need bigger film to get all that useless information onto the film. I haven't actually used 35-mm seriously since about 1971. I bought my first four by five in 1971, and it was love at first upside-down

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<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive, sometimes different, analysis of grid systems, see Rosalind Krauss' "Grids" October 9, Summer 1979, pp. 51-64.

sight. And, for some reason, the film format keeps getting bigger. It's true, I am looking for a sixteen by twenty now.

The more you like picky detail, and I just love trivial detail, the bigger your format should be. And so people who really love detail really love big cameras.

ONE PARTICULAR TRAIT OF THE PHOTOS IS THEIR DENSITY OF INFORMATION. DETAILS PILE UP. THIS DENSITY IS HEIGHTENED BY BOTH CAMERA AND PRINT MANIPULATION. DAVID'S FAMILIARITY WITH LARGE FORMAT ALLOWS HIM TO ADJUST THE LANDSCAPE AT WILL WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF CAMERA MECHANICS. CAREFUL PLACEMENT OF ELEMENTS WITHIN THE FRAME ASSURES CLARITY AND SEPARATION. AND SOMETIMES INVOKES SUBTLE IRONY. A WRECKING BALL HANGING FROM A CRANE IS ALIGNED WITH THE EDGE OF AN EXISTING BUILDING BEHIND THE CONSTRUCTION SITE. TODAY AN OFFICE BUILDING, TOMORROW A PARKING LOT. CAMERA ADJUSTMENTS ARE NOT MERELY USED TO SUBVERT PURIST DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS, BUT FUNCTION IN THE COMMENTARY AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE IMAGE.

D.M.: When I photograph a parking lot, and two blocks away there's a row of high-rise buildings, and when I make that print and you can see detail inside the windows of the buildings, that's why I use large format. The ultimate technological voyeur.

IRONY, CONTRADICTION, SUBTLETY, AND PRECISION COEXIST WITH OTHER COMMENTARY, MODIFYING INTERPRETATION OF THE CITY. SKYLINES ARE BROKEN BY A MIX OF PAST AND PRESENT ARCHITECTURE; DETERIORATING STRUCTURES RUB AGAINST THE NEW AND SHINY. THE CONTRADICTIONS RAISE QUESTIONS, IRONY SLIPS IN QUIETLY. THE ARM OF A BACK-HOE INSCRIBED WITH "AMERICAN" CUTS PRECISELY INTO CANADIAN SOIL. SHADOW ENCROACHES ON RECEDING SUNLIGHT. SOME-



TIMES A SENSE OF HUMOUR IS OVERWHELMED BY PESSIMISM. STONE SLABS FROM A DISMANTLED BUILDING LINE UP ON A GRASSY PLOT FACING THE CITY. A FUNERAL AURA COLOURS THE PICTURE.

A CONVERSATION WITH A FORMER STUDENT, TERRI JOSEPH, DURING THE MONTREAL FILM FESTIVAL ILLUSTRATES HIS PECULIAR TENDENCIES:

T: HAVE YOU SEEN ANY OF THE FILMS?

D: ARE YOU KIDDING?

T: THEY MOVE TOO FAST TO BE SEEN CAREFULLY, RIGHT?

D: SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

T: WELL, IT CERTAINLY IS A UNIQUE VIEW OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.